they passed on to the Mujahideen. Usually women obtained information from their connections in the administration and would pass them to urban resistance groups for their own use and for the use of commanders in the countryside. The majority of cases of Russians and enemy agents who disappeared or were killed were due to the initiative of women. They were also responsible for a majority of bomb explosions.

At times they were arrested for their clandestine activities and were tortured. 'I was hit on my mouth by a heavy fist, and kicked with boots. Some KHAD agents started pulling me by the hair from one side to the other. Blood ran out of my mouth, ears and nose. One of them took out a pistol and pointed it at my head and said, "I am going to count from one to fifty; if you have not answered by then, you will be shot." "Tell us who are the leaders of your brand." The interrogation continued for seven days. As they failed to get any confession, they threatened that my husband and children would be brought in front of me and tortured,' said Tajwar Kakar[12] while narrating her story of arrest and torture.[13]. It was comparatively easier for women to carry out clandestine activities because they were the least suspected.[14] Mrs. Tajwar Kakar, actively participated in the underground Resistance. Disguised as a village woman entirely veiled and under the pretext of a personal petition, she would go from one administrative office to another in order to find the Resistance connections, and exchange information. She confirmed the information concerning women resistance in the provincial cities. Apart from the women in Kunduz in the north, whom she organized herself, there were strong female resistance movements in Herat and Kandahar cities.[15]Well connected with male resistance groups, the women organized themselves in three sections:-

1. Investigations of people collaborating with the enemy.

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[12] Tajwar Kakar actively involved in the resistance soon after the Communist coup of 1978. She established with male commanders of the resistance in the province of Kunduz, a school in the small village of Choqor Qishlaq, which trained boys in the use of arms and explosives.

[13] Doris Lessing, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, PICADOR, London 1987 pp. 151-152

[14] Ibid..

2. Pursuit of suspects and discovering their connections.
3. Operational group. The most active in an operation group against the enemy was called Fndia; she was pretty and very innocent looking and very skilful in abducting and executing Russians; she carried out at least fifteen successful operations; all the victims were Russians.[16]

Some Afghan women were suicide bombers and at times they danced in front of the Soviet tanks. The Soviets forces believed that they were being welcomed as dancing is a symbol of joy, little knowing that Afghan women were ready to sacrifice their lives for the defense of their *watan* against foreign forces. Even High School girls in Kabul took out processions and demonstrated against the Soviet invasion and taunted their males for not participating in the liberation struggle. They in their unique style motivated their males to confront the invading forces and sacrifice their lives. An Afghan Mujahida[17] remarked that though some individuals never paid respect to the rights of women, but it is worth mentioning that women and girls played an important role in the independence struggle against Communism in our motherland. Provision of food to the Mujahideen under siege was a common activity amongst the women. They also at times harvested the fields when their husbands or fathers could not return from the movement.

One finds few organized resistance movements amongst Afghan women. Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is one such organization. It was established in 1977 by Afghan women intellectuals under the leadership of Meena Kishwar Kamal, who was assassinated by fundamentalist forces in 1987 in Quetta, Pakistan. It campaigns for women rights and provides education and health facilities for women and children. Most of its operations are based in Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan. These include several well-organized schools in Peshawar, Quetta and a health centre in

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[15] Afghan Information Centre, *Monthly Bulletin* No.58, Jan 1986
[16] Ibid.
[17] Kathleen Howard Merriam, Women and Their Struggle for Survival', op. cit. P.123

Quetta. Before 1978 RAWA's activities were confined to agitation for women's rights and democracy but after 1979 it became directly involved in the war of resistance.

For the purpose of pursuing their objectives under the slogan of freedom, democracy and social justice, RAWA has several publications in Persian, Pushto, Urdu and English. *Payam -e-Zan* (Women's Message) is sold by the activists despite opposition. It has liberationist themes and highlights the religious fascism in Afghanistan.

Afghan men appreciated the role of women in the Afghan conflict. The acceptance of women and indeed pride in their role as maintainers of home was crucial to jihad. While their men fought in Afghanistan, women refugees looked after the families and accepted new responsibilities willingly. "Women have been the main partners of Mujahideen in the conflict. Without their logistical support it would have been simply impossible for the Mujahideen to carry on the jihad," said Dr. Nooristani.[18]

During the jihad one would often see men coming home from the war to rest with their families in the Pakistani camps. If they were a little slow about going back to the battlefield, the woman would push and shame them into doing their duty for the jihad. The women therefore, played a vital part in the war, for it was their strength that motivated men to keep fighting.[19]

The refugee areas developed one of the highest birthrates anywhere in the world: 13.6 children per woman compared to the already high rate of 9.3 prior to 1978. This high fertility rate was not just among the rural women in the refugee camps. Some urban women who already had grandchildren started new families. So many men were being killed in battle, they said, that women wanted to have

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[18] In an interview with Dr. Nooristani, Director, Afghan German Basic Education, Peshawar on 25th October 29, 1999

[19] Nancy Hatch Dupree, *The Women of Afghanistan*, text 'Afghan Refugee of talk by Nancy Dupree sponsored by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1998 pp.9-10

as many children as possible. This was considered an appropriate way for women to contribute to jihad.[20]

Widowhood is the most tragic event is a woman's life The tragedy of widowhood is compounded for many women by simultaneous multiple losses: husbands, sons, grandsons, brothers, fathers and other male-in-laws can be eliminated in one fatal action. In this manner, a single household can be suddenly deprived of three generations of male providers, burdening survivors with untold economic and mental hardship. For the most part widows bear their sorrow with courage and dignity. [21] Most of the widows console themselves with the knowledge that their husbands fell honorably, fighting jihad and are now respectfully enrolled among the *shahidan* (martyrs). Afghan women take pride in being a widow of a *shaheed* (martyr).

"We were proud when we lost our beloved ones during the Soviet invasion, but now we cannot be proud," said Aqila, a teacher at GTZ Middle School in Kacha Ghari in Peshawar. She herself is a widow with 7 children. Her husband actively participated in jihad against the Soviets. She assisted him in the holy cause, but when the power struggle amongst Mujahideen started, her husband, Ghulam Khan, lost interest. She puts the blame on Babrak Karmal, Mujahideen and Taliban for the on-going conflict. "Each one has had a gun on his shoulder and considered himself as the ultimate authority." This attitude will not contribute to peace in Afghanistan.

The Soviet Withdrawal and Mujahideen Take Over

The conclusion of Geneva Accords in 1988 called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. The last Soviet soldier left on 25th February 1989.

The government of Dr. Najeebullah finally fell three years later in April 1992.

In the wake of these new developments foreign aid to the Afghan refugees dwindled. The US claimed victory for their part in the fall of Communism, expecting Afghanistan to magically return to the normal after a decade of ethnic

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[20] Ibid. p.10

[21] Nancy Hatch Dupree, *Of Special Concern: Women Among the Afghan Refugees* op.cit p.14

division and faction quarreling.[22] The long war had brought about changes in the political and social strata, which made it difficult to return to normalcy. The Mujahideen under the leadership of Sibghatullah Mojajdidi assumed power. The period between the Soviet withdrawal and the outbreak of civil war in 1993 represented a lost opportunity, though the political seeds of failure had probably been sown much earlier because of the greed and opportunism of the competing Mujahideen groups and the manipulations of their foreign backers.[23]

Having supported the Mujahideen throughout the liberation struggle, women saw the rays of peace finally falling on Afghanistan. They attached high hopes and expected real peace from them. Unfortunately the change so highly expected and desired did not come. They had been partners of Mujahideen and had been applauded for their role but now that very partnership was going to founder given the conservative mentality of the new leadership. Mujahideen were cautious in curtailing their role and movement as abrupt changes would have led to the alienation of women, which they could not afford at that stage. Gradually women's rights to full participation in social, economic, cultural and political life of the country were drastically curtailed. In August 1995, the government of President Rabbani barred a delegation of 12 women from attending the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, saying that issues discussed at the conference were against basic Islamic principles. Nonetheless, women continued to work and study outside their homes. Kabul women demonstrated in the streets in July 1996 against the then prime minister Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, who

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[22] By this time traditional sources of income now had vanished, and many people looked to other means to support themselves and their families. As a result, Afghanistan became a haven for the drug and arms dealer of the world. Some veteran mujahideen sold their war experience and expertise to anyone who was willing to pay them. These young mercenaries had never known peace they had no home, no family, no hope and no foreseeable future. They had no education that could help them find civilian employment, but suddenly there was a demand for the Afghan fighters. Today in the name of Islam the Afghans are fighting in Chechneya, Tajikistan, Algeria, Kashmir etc. See Ameen Moshref's *The Taliban.*

[23] *Refugees,* No.108, 11-1997 op.cit. pp.6-7

announced a series of measures to curb women's rights.[24] They had started imposing restrictions on women, though they were never fully successful.

It soon dawned upon Afghan women that the Mujahiden were no better than the Soviets, as they were now being dishonored by their own countrymen. Sexual crimes against women, gang raping, abductions of young females, black mail of families with eligible daughters etc. were common place during the Mujahideen era. These events severely damaged the image of Mujahideen amongst the women refugees. However the new political change had an element of optimism for the women, their *watan* was free from the Soviets, jihad had finally succeeded.

It led to massive flows of refugees' back home. There was a huge surge of collective optimism which resulted in no fewer than 1.2 million Afghans returning from Pakistan within six months-all of them assisted by the an extremely stretched UNHCR. Rahila,[25] an Afghan refugee born in Pakistan had dreamt of returning to her *watan* once the Soviets withdrew and peace returned to Afghanistan. "It was my greatest wish to see my beloved *watan*, but soon I was disillusioned. I reached Kabul the day Prof. Rabbani was sworn in. There was tranquility in the city only for a week. Bombardment and fighting resumed amongst the Mujahideen. I wanted to return to Pakistan but my father, a *watan dost* (patriot) wanted to stay back as he believed the fighting was a temporary phase and it would not last long. One day a rocket hit my own house and I was wounded. When I gained my consciousness, I found myself back in Peshawar. My father did not want me to die in Kabul." "I have made up my mind that I will not return to Afghanistan until true peace comes," said Rahila. She is one of those any refugee women who have been disappointed by Mujahideen's power struggle. They had been successful in liberating their country (as they term it)

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[24] *Afghanistan: Grave Abuses in the Name of Religion* , Amnesty International, 18 Nov 1996 London, UK. P.13

[25] Currently teaching in an Afghan Commissionerate School at Kacha Ghari, Peshawar.

from the Soviets but liberating it from their own people became a dilemma for Afghans.
This period also saw a new influx of refugees into Pakistan. They were relatively highly educated, modern, urbanized and therefore, unwilling to confine themselves to the refugee camps. They were critical of the policies of Mujahideen and held them responsible for their displacement. Repatriation that had started early 1992 stopped and there were reverse flows.

In this new scenario RAWA directed its activities to the jihadi elements and criticized them for the power wrangling. It was not alone in targeting the Mujahidden. There were lone voices too. Nooriya, a communication officer working at Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) Peshawar, had worked in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs before she migrated to Pakistan in 1992. She blamed the misguided policies of Mujahideen and the continued conflict for her lost status. "No woman can work in war as it is darkness," said an anxious Nooriya.
Fatana Gilani formed the Afghan Women Council (AWC) [26] Peshawar, in 1993. She has family connections to one of the leading Mujahideen parties -National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (*Mahaz-I-Milli- Islami Afghanistan*) of Pir Syed Ahmed Gilani. Her mission is to deliver high quality reproductive health services that are given in an atmosphere that is respectful and supportive of Afghan women, who she claims, are the true martyrs and victims of the jihad.[27]
Khurhseed Afrasiyabi, a Tajik, has been in Pakistan for 16 years. She heads the Muslim Women Society, and Fatimaul Zuhra Education Centre, Peshawar, which were earlier supported by the Arab League. She is active in reviving the old Islamic culture, values and beliefs amongst women refugees and children.

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[26] It is composed solely of Afghan women, including doctors, and teachers. Its aim is to provide educational and health facilities to Afghan children and women in the refugee areas and to train the Afghans in the area of women's rights within the framework of Afghanistan's cultural and religious traditions. It maintains a well-organized school and a mother and child health clinic in Peshawar, as well as a hospital and clinic in Kabul.

[27] Dirdre Wulf, *Refugee Women and Reproductive Health Care*: *Reassessing Priorities*, June 1994 New York. P.44

For her this is equal to jihad as she believes that it is exactly what the disillusioned Afghan refugees need at present. She attributes the current problems in Afghanistan to Western imperialist forces, which do not want peace in the country as it serves their vested designs.

During this period one observed a growing sense of disillusionment among refugee women. Most aired their views against the in fighting and declared that jihad had come to an end. However, most women believed that interference by external powers made peace elusive in Afghanistan. Mujahideen therefore, had to struggle against the external powers, resultantly jihad took another form. In this phase women became reluctant partners. In 1994 a new force emerged on the Afghan scene-the Taliban when they captured Kandahar from mujahideen forces. In 1996 they overran the capital, Kabul.

Taliban and Afghan women

While sweeping across three-quarters of Afghanistan, the Taliban generally did not face serious resistance. Today they hold the majority of Afghanistan's thirty-two provinces. Most of the former warlords have surrendered or fled to neighboring countries. Numbering over 60,000 fighters, Taliban are the largest army in Afghanistan as compared to General Dostum's 50,000 and Ahmed Shah Masood's 20,000 soldiers. Taliban were carefully referred to as a movement, not a faction, and were not named after their leaders. However, the core of the movement is mostly comprised of veterans of the Afghan-Soviet War.

The speed with which the Taliban burst onto the Afghan political scene stemmed from several factors, none of them military. After the fall of Najeebullah, various Afghan regions fell under the sway of different factions. Meanwhile the Pushtun south, which was tribally fragmented in the best of times, sank into a state of anarchy. While superficially affiliated with parties, local commanders pursued their personal interests of money making and fighting rival groups in order to expand their influence. In a deeply religious culture, the Taliban's own religious prestige and the simplicity of their

objectives- disarming all warring factions and implementing Islamic law, coupled with their position as religious students and a strong endorsement from the ulema further heightened their appeal to the war-weary Afghans.[28]

The Taliban have stated that they wish to establish a pure, Islamic state and that women have no place in the public arena. They are required to stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. They cling to the symbol of a protected woman. Women have been banned from going to work or leaving home unaccompanied by a close male relative and girls from going to school. They have to observe a strict dress code- wearing a *burqa*[29] and trousers fully covering their ankles. Women had worn *burqa* in the pre-Taliban era too but it had not been an enforced dress code.

The divide between city and country has rarely been starker as the Taliban appear to be forcibly imposing their own rural culture onto the cities. It is a direct reversal of attempts in the 1970s by young Communist ideologues to force an extremely conservative, rural population to send their girls to school, thereby creating considerable resentment which still affects women's issues today.[30] Rural women feel comfortable with the Taliban regime. Security has been improved, bandit leaders who terrorized the countryside have disappeared. They support them in their cause of bringing ultimate peace to the entire country and defeating the Northern Alliance. Volunteers (Taliban) from N.W.F.P and Quetta have been participating in the current war against the Northern Alliance. The Taliban having a rural background themselves can count upon rural Afghan refugees for support and volunteers to fight.

Educated Afghan women do not hesitate in voicing their criticism against the Taliban. They are fed up with the continuation of war in their *watan* because life has become very difficult in Afghanistan. Fatana Gilani, the chairperson of Afghan Women Council has openly criticized the Taliban. "They have not

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[28] Rameen Moshref, *The Taliban,* Occasional Paper #35, The Afghanistan Forum, NewYork, May 1997 pp.1-12

[29] A garment covering the body from head to toe with only a small, lace covered opening to look through. It looks like a shuttle cock.

restored peace to Afghanistan nor have they provided jobs to their countrymen. Hundreds of people are fleeing for better life and future," said Fatana. She alleged that the people were being disgraced, as men were forced to grow beard and the women were pressurized to observe *purdah* (veiling of women). "The Taliban have been brought up in *madrassas* (religious schools). They were taken there when they were young, and they stayed there day and night. They were taught by ultra-conservative mullahs, who told them that woman is nothing but a distraction. She is a sexual being, whose only objective in life is to distract a man from his religious studies. Keep away from them, keep them locked up so you do not have to look at them."[31]

Taliban edicts have also hit hard an estimated 30,000 widows, many of whom are the sole providers for their families- as well as many other women who do not have a close male relative to accompany them in public. Some widows have been allowed to work in areas under the Taliban control, but even for them it is not easy to get permission.[32] "Present restrictions are said to be necessary because females are not safe outside their homes."[33]
The restrictions on Afghan women are not well taken by the international community, particularly human rights activists. Radhika Cooaraswamy, UN special rapporteur on Violence Against Women in a recent report highlighted the Taliban discriminatory policies toward women. She reported that the Taliban exercised official discrimination in all areas affecting women rights, including health, education, employment, movement and physical security.

Afghan women have become the targets of Pakistani Taliban. RAWA had to postpone their scheduled demonstration on 28Dec, 1998 in Peshawar due to the pressure of religious circles. The decision was taken by RAWA after the local police high ups expressed their helplessness in providing protection to their

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[30] *Refugees,* No.108, 11-1997 op.cit. p. 29
[31] Nancy Hatch Dupree, *The Women of Afghanistan* op.cit. pp. 12-13
[32] *Afghanistan: Grave Abuses in the Name of Religion* , Amnesty International, op.cit. p.15
[33] *Refugees,* No.108, 11-1997 op.cit. p. 29

AFGHAN WOMEN REFUGEES
AND
THE CONFLICT

NASREEN GHUFRAN

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE ON 'WOMEN AND CHILDREN REFUGEE AND REFUGEE LIKE SITUATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA AT DHAKA, BANGLADESH

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REFUGEE AND MIGRATORY MOVEMENTS RESEARCH UNIT (RMMRU)
DHAKA, BANGLADESH

protest procession. The demonstration was going to highlight the problems of Afghan women opposed to both the Kabul government and the Mujahideen groups and to press Pakistani authorities to bring to justice those responsible for the killing of RAWA members. Last time their demonstration had been attacked by local Taliban and the police had baton charged them. A Taliban spokesman had informed the Inspector General Police, Peshawar that in case RAWA took out their proposed procession, they would break their legs. He added that they did not allow the female to come out from their houses in Afghanistan, then how could they allow them to take to roads here in Pakistan. He added that the processions by the females were against the spirit of Islam. When asked as to why they have been trying to implement the laws of Afghanistan in Pakistan, he replied that their laws are applicable to all the Afghans irrespective of their place of livings.[34] RAWA members have offered sacrifices in the past as well and would do so again in its struggle to establish democracy in Afghanistan.

It is struggling for a true democratic government in Kabul, which would ensure freedom of thought religion and expression and protect women rights. According to them only a secular government can prevent Islam from being used as a retrogressive tool in the hands of fanatics. Majority rural Afghan refugees and moderate elements do not support RAWA activities and criticize their radical political thoughts. They are not a popular force to lead the majority of Afghan women.

Fatana Gilani frequently approaches the international community and the government of Pakistan to play a positive role in the restoration of peace in Afghanistan. She stresses upon the neighboring countries to provide food, medicines, books, and other necessities of life to the Afghans instead of providing them weapons, Kalshnikovs and other materials of destruction.

Some Afghan women are pessimistic about peace in Afghanistan. "Peace cannot come to Afghanistan in the present set up, it will come only if God wills it," said Rahila (refugee woman). She is of the opinion that women cannot play any role

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[34] *The News*, (daily) Islamabad. December 28, 1999

in peace because they are hardly given their rights. They do not have say even in home affairs let alone state affairs. Previously they had courage but Taliban have discouraged them to the extent that even educated and politically conscious women feel helpless in playing any positive role in peace efforts."

Others see hope and anxiously await peace in the war-torn country because they do want to go home despite all the difficulties. "I want to give hope to my sisters in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan today that this dark night will end very soon. We will have our freedom of expression and thinking one day," said Mrs. Abdul Malik while reacting to the Taliban ban on the celebration of Nauroze[35] and imposing restrictions on women by the students militia."Life without freedom is not meaningless. We hold our traditions and freedom very dear to us."[36]

Conclusion

Afghan women have played an invisible role in the conflict. While they have not been in the forefront and done the actual fighting yet their role cannot be denied. They have been admired for their contributions, though their resistance never took an organized shape. They have sacrificed their homes, sons, husbands and fathers to protect the honor of their country. Being patriotic they willingly extended help and collaborated with the Mujahideen against the Soviets. Resisting the invasion was shouldered by most Afghan women both rural and urban as a holy duty. Though the Mujahideen leadership being conservative, yet it allowed women to confront the Soviets mainly through underground activities. Their support was well taken at a time when the social and traditional structure of the Afghan society had started breaking. When the Mujahideen assumed power, the much-awaited peace did not come. Warlords cannot become political visionaries, and it is for this reason that the fighting continued in Afghanistan even after the Soviet withdrawal.

[35] Traditional Afghan festival. It heralds the advent of spring season.
[36] *The News*, March 22, 1999

Most Afghan women became disenchanted with the on-going war but blamed the external forces more than the power wrangling amongst the Mujahideen. The Taliban gave a new dimension to the conflict. While they have restored peace in most areas under their control (except in the north of the country where fighting is still going on) their restrictive policies, termed by the West as 'gender apartheid' have alienated mainly urban-educated women. They fail to comprehend that it is the educated and politically conscious women who can play a positive role in the restructuring of Afghanistan. These women have become extremely skeptical about the Taliban government and are not ready to repatriate despite peace because they do not see any place for themselves in a society where earlier they held some important positions.

The divisions have exacerbated due to the prolonged war. Women too have been the targets of these new cleavages in the society. Their honor and dignity has been lost in the way. This is clear from the way the Pakistanis look upon urban Afghan women. They mostly think of them as prostitutes to be easily hired. While these women strictly observe *purdah* and cover their faces and bodies in public life but any Afghan woman with a black scarf around her face is a likely victim of being dubbed as a prostitute. While it may not be entirely true, but images play an important role in forming opinions and acting accordingly.

A jihad must be carried out to restore the lost dignified image of all Afghan women irrespective of their ethnic and social backgrounds. The international community and the neighboring countries while searching for peace solutions should also support the Afghan women in their struggle of finding a rightful place for themselves in the society. Afghan Women Council, RAWA and Afghan Women Association International, should accelerate their peace activities and should strive to bridge the growing gap between educated and non-educated, urban and rural refugee women. Only a more organized and moderate women movement will have an impact upon the present regime of Afghanistan. Unless moderate and having a popular standing among both women and men, they will

not influence many. They have to be assertive and firm in their resolve to bring peace. Cynicism and waiting for Allah will not help. Making peace with oppression is against the dignity and grace of Afghan women. It is therefore essential to check the growing disillusionment of Afghan women and otherwise the future of not only women but also the entire nation seems bleak.

AFGHAN WOMEN REFUGEES AND THE CONFLICT

Nasreen Ghufran*

"Our message for you, the women of Afghanistan, is to fight and stay strong and above all stay alive. We will do our part to end apartheid all over the globe."

Parvin Darabi (Huma Darabi Foundation,USA).

Peace still seems to be elusive in the case of Afghanistan. Given the protracted nature of Afghan conflict, human suffering has been multiplying. The political, economic and social fabric of this unfortunate country has been ruptured, Afghan refugees in Pakistan see no immediate silver lining. Women amongst the refugee population have suffered most. They have lost their fathers, brothers and husbands in the war, a loss that is irreplaceable. Though she wants to see peace she contributes to war by keeping the human supply line across the border intact. This may not be freely willed but the fact remains that Afghan refugees have been participating in jihad. The trauma of having been uprooted, deprived of normal family and community support or cultural ties, the abrupt changes in status and roles, in addition to the absence of an adult male head of family, have rendered some Afghan women more vulnerable than others.

Little attention has been paid to women role in the Afghan conflict. War, especially civil war brutalizes society. Women hold families, communities, together, often playing a key role in food production and other economic activities and caring for the children, the elderly and the sick. War disrupts these patterns and responsibilities. The pressures on women are even greater when they are forced to flee with their dependents.[1] How do women view the conflict? How have they been affected by it? Have they contributed to it? Do

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[1] Olivia Benett, Jo Bexley, Kitty Warnock (eds.) *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect*, Panos, London 1995, p.2



they want peace? Can they play a role in bringing peace to the war ravaged country? No major studies have been carried out looking into the role of women in conflict and peace making efforts in Afghanistan. This limited research will highlight an area that has not been much focused upon in Afghan refugee studies.

Different Phases of the Afghan Conflict

There have been three main phases of the Afghan conflict so far:- a/. the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the ensuing anti-Soviet resistance; b/.the signing of the Geneva Accords and the Soviet withdrawal from the country, leading to Mujahideen assumption of power and the intra-Mujahideen power struggle; c/. the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 1996 and the ongoing rivalry with the Northern Alliance (the forces opposed to Taliban). The wars in its different dimensions have affected women. Traditionally Afghan women have been revered and protected as they symbolize family and community honor. Given the war situation they have been exposed to harsh treatment both at home and host country. The dignity and honor so precious to them have been marred.

The April 1978 *Saur* Revolution in Afghanistan brought a group of left-oriented intellectuals in power. Although the new leadership insisted that it had risen from the masses, its heavy-handed attempts to impose reforms on a predominantly rural population that had traditionally resisted interference from central governments met with early dissent. As the rumblings of discontent flared into open conflict, the Kabul government reacted with harsh, repressive measures, alienating virtually every segment of society. The 1979 Soviet invasion greatly exacerbated an already unstable situation. Mujahideen groups took up arms, first against the Soviet troops and later against each other.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had killed nearly a million of the country's 15-17 million people, had driven more than 5 million refugees to neighboring countries and had displaced 2-3 million more within the country's borders. It also led to a deadly cold war regional conflict by the super powers. When the Soviets realized that their desired policy was not bearing positive fruit

they decided to extricate themselves from Afghanistan. On February8, 1988, Gorbachev publicly announced that the Soviet troops would withdraw from Afghanistan within ten months from the effective date of a UN sponsored agreement. The Geneva Accords were intended not only to promote a political solution in Afghanistan but also to launch a new era of international cooperation. "When the Afghan knot is untied," Soviet president Gorbachev predicted at the beginning of 1988, "it will have the most profound impact on other regional conflicts."[2]

The withdrawal of Soviet troops from May15, 1989, greatly reduced the military pressure on the Mujahideen. Resistance fighters captured or occupied the entire frontier with Pakistan. Several other provincial garrisons fell and were retaken or negotiated truces with local mujahideen. The fragmented political and military structures of the mujahideen prevented them from turning these local victories into a national one. The Soviet presence had galvanized Afghanistan's society into a certain unity of action, but for many fighters the withdrawal of Soviet troops meant the end of the jihad, of the religious obligation to unite with Muslims against non-Muslim aggressors.

Mujahideen who still believed in jihad after the Soviet withdrawal confronted with disbelief the alliance of Hikmatyar and Tanai. If Khalq and Hizb could ally, there was no more jihad, just a multilateral struggle for power.[3] It was not until the fall of communists in Moscow in August 1991 and the end of Soviet aid that they were able to deal a decisive blow to the communist regime of Dr. Najeebullah in Kabul. The combined forces of mujahideen Commander Ahmad Shah Masood and Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek militia leader who had defected from Najeebullah's camp, took capital in April 1992. Fighting immediately began among the victorious parties in a country that had been at

[2] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed Sate*, Yale University Press, US, 1995, pp.6-7

war since 1979.[4] The Afghan civil war was not 'primitive' or 'tribal' but strongly political. The main contention was over as to who should govern.

As a result of factional fighting Kabul was reduced to rubble. Up to 1 million were displaced inside Afghanistan. However, 1.3 million refugees from both Pakistan and Iran returned home, as they believed that with Mujahideen peace would come to the country. They were disappointed as power wrangling persisted. The continued fighting paved the way for the rise of Taliban in 1994. Though most analysts believed that Taliban would be unable to impose themselves on the predominantly Tajik and Uzbek north, within two years they captured the largely Tajik city of Heart, the capital Kabul and three quarters of the country.[5] While Taliban brought the greatly desired peace in the areas under their control, but they have not yet reconciled their differences with the opposition - the Northern Alliance. Both continue to fight against each other.

With this brief overview of the different phases in Afghan conflict, let us now analyze how women refugees view the continuing conflict and aspire peace in their country. Afghan women cannot remain oblivious to the war because it has now raged for 20 years and there is no sign of it ending soon. The statistics though not accurate reflect the suffering the Afghans have undergone and are undergoing. In the course of war for control of Afghanistan, over 1.5 million have been killed (3-400,000 were children). 3% of the Afghan population is disabled amongst which 50% of the disabled are war victims. Over 1 million widowed (exact figures are not available) according to an ICRC survey in Jan 1997 there are 50,000 widows in Kabul alone, each with an average of 7-9 children; 1/2 million have been disabled.

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[3] Ibid. p.117 The March 1990 coup in which Khalqi Defense Minister Shahnawaz Tanai united with Hizb-i-Islami leader Gulbaddin Hikmatyar and the Pakistani ISI against Dr. Najeebullah was only the most dramatic example of an alliance across an ideological gulf.

[4] Gilles Dorronsoro, 'Afghanistan's Civil War' in *Current History*; January 1995. P.37

The Afghan conflict and women

If one digs deeply into the Afghan conflict, the gender element of the conflict cannot be ignored. The resistance to *Saur* Revolution and later Soviet invasion had a strong woman factor. The bride-price limitation and the minimum marriage age (16) laws affected rural economic relations which were based to some degree on bride-price payment and further more these payments were regarded as women's social security. Most Afghans resisted the promotion of girls' education. Declaring a jihad against illiteracy, women of all ages were forcibly dragged into classes where they were bombarded with Marxist rhetoric. Despite the strong and often blunt resistance to these new laws by rich and poor alike, these laws were forcibly implemented. The regime's determination to move ahead with its reforms contributed to the birth of Afghan resistance movement.[6] As resistance grew, the government got more repressive leading to mass refugee flows into neighboring Pakistan.

Women honor was at stake. In Afghanistan women have symbolized the nation's honor as well as family honor. In order to protect this honor various actors in the conflict have actually made women vulnerable and exposed them to the brutalities of war. It is extremely difficult to comprehend that a culture that value woman dignity so much, can play havoc with the very dignity of women that they have tried to honor and protect. Their tribal history speaks highly of women as peacemakers. In tribal wars, if a woman intervened, fighting used to be over. That was the level of reverence the Afghan women enjoyed in an under developed society by western standards. The protracted conflict has snatched the very reverence that had been voluntarily bestowed upon women in the past.

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[5] 'Afghanistan: The Unending Crisis' *Refugees*, No. 108, II-1997, UNHCR, Geneva. pp. 24-25

[6] Kathleen Howard-Merriam, 'Afghan Refugee Women and their Struggle for Survival' in *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival,* edited by Grant M. Farr and John G. Merriam, Vanguard Books, Lahore, Pakistan. 1988 pp. 104-105

They soon became the victims and were badly affected by the war. "We have nothing left," said one father, but still we Afghans know how to protect the honor of our women."[7] War had disrupted their lives, families and property etc. Socially appropriate female roles stress motherhood, child socialization, family nurturing, household management and social activities within community networks. All these familiar roles were to be carried out in a totally different environment, which itself was stressful.

"Life is important-we came to save our lives," said a refugee woman. Ayesha commented on the changes in her life since she first heard the news of her husband's execution. He was charged with aiding the Afghan freedom fighters in their efforts to bring about Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. She had then made the decision to flee for the sake of her children, especially her teenage son. They successfully crossed the border avoiding the land mines that left many others with missing limbs.[8]

Migration to Pakistan was a trauma. They had left everything familiar behind. War had devastating effects on their lives. Women were not ready for the new roles thrusted upon them. They were reluctant to wear the mantle of refugehood but they had no other choice. They did not know what was being a refugee (in the legal sense of the term). They refer to themselves as *musafirs* (travellers) giving rise to their expectations, as *musafirs* in the Pukhtun culture normally expect hospitality and help from the locals. They thought that they had escaped war and would be secure in the new environment but it soon dawned upon them that life as a refugee is extremely difficult even if the host country takes extra cares to protect and accommodate them. Coming to Pakistan meant peace for the women and their families. However, the newfound peace was not without challenges for the Afghan refugee women, whom mostly had a rural

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[7] Nancy Hatch Dupree, *Of Special Concern: Women Among the Afghan Refugees*, Ford Foundation, US. Jan 1984

[8] *Alert: Afghan Women in Crisis Four Years After the Soviet Invasion,* Washington. D.C. June 1984

background. These refugees consisted of a vast majority of Pushtuns, who left their homes largely because their lives were threatened.

Rural women who were used to freedom of movement within their villages, suddenly found themselves confined in refugee camps with no space of their own. They felt vulnerable, as they did not have any privacy in the original refuge camps. They along with their men undertook the responsibility of building houses. In some case women alone shouldered this as either they were widows or their men were engaged in jihad against the Soviets.

When bourgeois urban women became refugees, many found themselves leaving modern houses and apartments for the cramped quarters of refugee camps or crowded sections of Pakistani cities. Living conditions in exile were especially hard for these urban women. Instead of one family per house, there were sometimes five or six.[9] Their lives had been drastically affected by the war. Most Afghan men during this period kept shuttling between Pakistan and Afghanistan, participating in the liberation struggle.

How do Afghan women view the conflict?

Afghan women refugees in general are critical of war but sound supportive of jihad.[10] There is a difference between war and jihad, the latter is a holy war and Muslims all over the world have reverence for it. It is against an enemy which is non-Muslim. Fighting for a holy cause is a noble act and Muslims therefore, willingly support jihad. In the case of Afghanistan, the Soviets were considered atheists, and were termed as 'enemy of Allah' who had occupied their *watan* (country). Fighting against the Soviets was therefore not only a religious duty but a national cause too. For some it was not jihad, but a national struggle for liberation. The resistance therefore, could depend on a large reservoir of volunteers, who were ready to sacrifice their lives to defend their *watan*.

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[9] Ibid. p.11

[10] Jihad has many definitions, in general it means struggle and the highest form of jihad is the struggle against self.

Afghans have held two things in high esteem one is *watan* and the other is *khaza* (woman). These two are *namoos* (honor) for them. Women supported jihad as long as the Soviets remained in Afghanistan.

Women participation in the Afghan conflict was not a new phenomenon. They have always played an important role in inspiring and supporting their men folk in acts of courage and bravery in the defense of honor and nation. They are basically patriotic. They love their native land. That is why Afghan women in time of war helped Afghan warriors in the battle fields by providing services such as carrying supplies, removing bodies, helping the wounded. For example, in the Second Afghan war against the British, Malalay is known as the symbol of courage at Maiwand war.[11] Some Afghan poetry also reflects the courage of women in motivating their beloved ones to sacrifice their lives in honor of *watan*.

May you be blackened by gunpowder and dyed in blood;
But may you not return whole and in disgrace from the battlefield.

It is well that you are wounded in battle, my love!
Now I shall walk proudly.

My beloved sacrificed himself for the homeland;
I sew his shroud with hair from my locks.

Women Role during the Soviet Invasion

Although women role in the freedom struggle (war against the Soviets) inside and outside Afghanistan has not been highlighted given the patriarchal and tribal nature of the society but there have been accounts which indicate that women played a key role in the struggle. While they did not do the actual fighting but they were involved in distributing night letters and collecting information which

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[11] Wali M. Rahimi, *Status of Women in Afghanistan,* UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 1991 p.8